Where Do Blind Children Go to School?

PHOTO COURTESY DALLAS SERVICES FOR BLIND CHILDREN, DALLAS, TEXAS

A DEFINITION OF BLINDNESS

Any child who has a visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with glasses is considered legally blind. Children with a higher visual acuity may also be considered blind under certain other conditions, such as a severe field limitation.

Two Basic Plans:

There are two basic plans for educating blind children. One is in a residential school, the other is in a non-residential or local public school. Of the estimated fifteen thousand blind children in school today in the United States, about half go to public schools and about half go to residential schools.

THE NORTH CAROLINA SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND:

The residential school in North Carolina, the State School for the Blind, is located in Raleigh. Both the Negro and white divisions can boast of an excellent teaching staff, beautiful grounds, and a fine educational program from Kindergarten through high school. In addition to the basic educational courses found in any school, the State School for the Blind offers many extras, such as Braille, mobility instruction, craft work, and swimming instruction.

Advocates of sending blind children to the State School for the Blind say that here teachers with experience in helping blind children are available. They point to the many extras which are available only at the State School. Some feel that blind children need a period of shelter during which they can compete with other handicapped children rather than being crushed by competition with sighted children. Others feel that blind children get lost in a large public school program, and a specialized school just for blind children is able to concentrate on the needs of those children.

THE CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION:

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Department of Special Education offers a public school program designed especially for blind children. These children attend Dilworth School where they are assigned to regular classes. Each day they work with a resource teacher who is trained to teach blind children Braille and other skills. Braille or large type copies of text books are provided. Children are accepted from outside Mecklenburg County, but transportation is provided only for Mecklenburg residents. By the time a child has reached the seventh grade, he is able to manage with only occasional help, and he can go to the regular school in his district. The Mecklenburg Association for the Blind has cooperated with the Special Education Department by providing equipment and materials, and by special activities such as music instruction and swimming lessons.

Those who advocate a nonresidential school for blind children say it is best not to take small children away from their families. They believe that a good teacher can help blind children if she has the help of a well trained resource teacher. Finally, they contend that blind children sooner or later will have to live and compete in a sighted world, and an education which prepares them for this must be in a setting with sighted children.

STUDENTS LEAVING LINEBERRY HALL AT THE NORTH CAROLINA STATE SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND. PICTURE COURTESY THE NORTH CAROLINA STATE SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND, RALEIGH, N. C.

WHICH TYPE OF EDUCATION IS BEST:

The question of whether to send blind children to a residential or nonresidential school has long been discussed among those in work for the blind. Many studies have been made comparing those who have attended both, with those who attend the nonresidential schools generally being seen as better adjusted. However, a study done in 1961 by Dr. Emory Cowen and his Associates at the University of Rochester found no significant difference between residential school pupils and public school pupils. Dr. Cowen's study is the most recent, the best designed, and the most carefully executed study available, so it demands careful consideration. He concludes, quoting from the *Pinebrook Report,* published by the American Foundation for the Blind in 1957: " . . . Each child should be educated according to his individual needs, and . . . not for a long, long time — if ever — will any of the . . . types of education eliminate the other . . ." The most important thing is "each child, according to his individual needs."

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE SPECIFIC CHILD:

As parents of a blind child face this decision, there are pit falls in the way. Parents feel a responsibility for their children, and often are reluctant to relinquish that responsibility by sending the children away to school. Sometimes parents feel guilty about sending a child away to school, and want to keep him home for this reason. On the other hand, it is never easy to be parents of any child, and sometimes it is harder with a handicapped child. Sometimes the easiest thing to do is to send him away. These and other feelings are complicated by poorly constructed advice from many persons who are expressing their own prejudices or who are specialists in one area but are not qualified to make the decision for parents. At the Mecklenburg Association for the Blind we recognize compelling reasons why every parent must make the decision for his or her child, and we try to provide the information and encouragement which will help the parent. We believe in the parents' right, responsibility, and ability to make the proper decision, when adequate help is available.

WHAT KIND OF INFORMATION HELPS PARENTS MAKE THE DECISION?

First, if the decision is made on the basis of a particular child's needs, a careful evaluation by medical, psychological, and educational specialists is necessary. The Mecklenburg Association provides access to these evaluative services and interpretation of the information gathered by trained and experienced social caseworkers. Secondly, we provide information about what educational services are available. This includes not only the State and local school programs, but special programs for multiply handicapped or unusually intelligent blind children.

In some cases we will arrange for a committee of educators, primarily from the State School for the Blind and the local Department of Special Education, to discuss the information about a child and to make specific recommendations for the parents to consider.

Our experience has indicated that this type of evaluation is helpful for every blind child. The evaluation is not a one day affair, but a long term process, hopefully beginning whenever a diagnosis of blindness is made.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PARENTHOOD:

In spite of the fact that adults have a need to be parents, parenthood is never easy. It can be more difficult when a child has little or no vision. But, we know that most parents can face the decisions made necessary by blindness and can give their children what they need to become healthy, normal adults, in spite of their visual problems.

We also know that the way will not be easy. We have found that encouragement of a trained worker can be of great help to parents who struggle with the problems and feelings of blindness. Along with the responsibilities and problems of parenthood there is a joy which comes from seeing a small child develop into a mature human being. We are proud to serve as part of the team in this maturing process, along with those parents who make use of our services.

Requests for information are welcome.

FOR FURTHER READING

BLIND CHILDREN IN FAMILY AND COMMUNITY by Marietta B. Spencer. Available from the University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minn. $4.25

OUR BLIND CHILDREN: GROWING AND LEARNING WITH THEM by Berthold Lowenfield. Available from Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, Ill. $5.50

CONCERNING THE EDUCATION OF BLIND CHILDREN Compiled by Georgie Lee Abel. Available from the American Foundation for the Blind, 15 West 16th St., New York 11, N. Y. $1.00

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS OF A PRESCHOOL BLIND CHILD. Available from the New York State Department of Social Welfare.

THE PRESCHOOL CHILD WHO IS BLIND. Available from the U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C. 10 cents

These and other materials are available on loan from the Mecklenburg Association for the Blind.

This pamphlet was compiled by the Mecklenburg Association for the Blind to help parents plan for the education of blind children and to acquaint parents with the work of the Association. Although this booklet is prepared with the legally blind child in mind, the Association also offers a wide range of services for all children with visual handicaps.

MECKLENBURG ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND, INC.

704 Louise Avenue

Charlotte, North Carolina

FR 6-5691